DETROIT SPECIAL

Wienerworld WNRCD 5095 (Three CDs : 77.00; 74.00; 73.00)

CD One : JOHN LEE HOOKER : Miss Lorraine/Talkin' Boogie; L C GREEN : Come Back Sugar Mama/Little Machine; SLIM PICKENS : Papa's Boogie; BABY BOY WARREN : My Special Friend Blues/Nervy Woman Blues; EDDIE BURNS : Making A Fool Out Of Me/Squeeze Me Baby; BOBO JENKINS : Democrat Blues/Bad Luck and Trouble; CALVIN FRAZIER : Lillie Mae (Version 1)/Rockhouse; JOHN BRIM : Bus Driver;

L C GREEN : When The Sun Is Shining/Hold Me In Your Arms; CLARENCE POSEY : Rockin' Chair Boogie; DETROIT SLIM : Nelly Mae; BABY BOY WARREN : Lonesome Cabin Blues/Don't Want No Skinny Woman; EDDIE BURNS : Gangster Blues/Grievin' Blues; SAM KELLY : Ramblin' Around Blues; MARTEE BRADLEY : Now I'll Have To Sing The Blues/Winter Time Is Comin'; BABY BOY WARREN : Taxi Driver Blues/Bad Lover Blues

CD Two : JOHN LEE HOOKER : Graveyard Blues/I Love To Boogie;

L C GREEN : Little School Girl/Remember Way Back; EDDIE BURNS : Superstition/Biscuit Baking Woman; BABY BOY WARREN : Forgive Me Darling/Please Don't Think I'm Nosey; HARVEY HILL JR. : She Fool Me/Boogie Woogie Woman; CALVIN FRAZIER : Lilly Mae (Version 2);

HENRY SMITH : Dog Me Blues; BOBO JENKINS : Baby Don't You Want To Go/Ten Below Zero; BABY BOY WARREN : I Got Lucky/Let's Renew Our Love; JAMES WALTON : Papa Doo; EARL CHATMAN : Loving You Baby; DETROIT COUNT : Parrot Lounge/Detroit Boogie; BOBO JENKINS : Seasick and Waterbound; BIG JACK REYNOLDS : Pitch A Boogie Woogie; CALVIN FRAZIER : Lilly Mae (Version 3); BABY BOY WARREN : Mattie Mae/Santa Fe; LITTLE SONNY : Hastings Street After Hours/Love You Pretty Baby; JOHN LEE HOOKER : Have Mercy On Me

CD Three : BABY BOY WARREN : Somebody Put Bad Luck On Me/ Stop Breaking Down; LITTLE SONNY : Love Shock/I'll Love You Baby Until The Day I Die; EDDIE KIRKLAND : I'll Move You Baby/Mercy Blues; JOHN LEE HOOKER : Miss Sadie Mae/609 Boogie; DOCTOR ROSS : Cat

Squirrel/The Sunnyland; BOBO JENKINS : Nothing But Love/Tell Me Who;

EDDIE BURNS : Orange Driver/Hard Hearted Woman; LITTLE SONNY : I Gotta Find My Baby/Hear My Woman Calling; BABY BOY WARREN : Chuck-A-Luck (or Chicken)/Baby Boy Blues; EDDIE KIRKLAND : Done Somebody Wrong/I Need You Baby; BOB KELLY : She's My Baby; EDDIE BURNS : The Thing To Do; LITTLE SONNY ; I Hear My Woman Callin' (alternate); DOCTOR ROSS : Industrial Boogie/Thirty Two Twenty; BOBO JENKINS : Baby Don't You Want Me To Go (alternate)/Ten Below Zero (alternate)

Let me declare a very minor interest at the outset. Two of the 82 titles in this 3-CD box set were sourced from my own collection. Right, with that out of the way, we can get down to the task of assessing what is unquestionably a comprehensive retrospective of the blues recorded in the Motor City from 1948 through to 1962.

First, the package. The CDs come in a 'digi-box', complete with a 48-page booklet on the music and the environment that spawned it by veteran researcher/historian Mike Rowe, whose interviews with post-war Detroit artists such as Bobo Jenkins and Boogie Woogie Red, are now gracing the pages of this magazine, some 37 to 42 years after they were first taped. Not only does the booklet contain biographies of the artists and a complete 'sessionography'; it also features many vintage photos, the majority from Mike's own archive, of the artists and the clubs and bars in which they played. As an example of 'how to do it', this will take a heck of a lot of beating!

The 21 artists that are featured is a veritable Who's Who of the post-war Detroit Blues. There is inevitably some duplication of titles with previous compilations, especially the splendid 'Garden City Blues' issued by JSP only last year, but none with the equally splendid 'Battle of Hastings Street' that Ace issued a good ten years ago. Wisely in my view, compiler Mike Rowe and release co-ordinator Pete Moody have chosen to break up the running order of the CDs, so that you get no more than two tracks by any one artist before moving on to somebody else.

The lion's share of this particular smorgasbord falls to Baby Boy Warren and you will hear no complaints from me on that score. Baby Boy has sixteen

different titles (although the back of the digi-box only lists twelve!) and there isn't a dud amongst them. Stand-outs include 'Forgive Me Darling', with fine piano from the biographically-challenged Charley Mills; 'Chuck-A-Luck', which is an instrumental showcase for Sonny Boy Williamson No. 2's titanic harp and 'Stop Breaking Down', the Robert Johnson song, which features Boogie Woogie Red on the 88s.

The silver medal is shared by Bobo Jenkins and Eddie Burns, with ten tracks each. If you have just finished reading the first part of Mike Rowe's interview with Bobo in this magazine, you will have realised how important Bobo was in the history of Detroit blues. He was by no means a natural musician and never a great guitarist – witness the hesitant start to 'Bad Luck and Trouble' – but put him with stellar musicians such as Eddie Taylor and Willie Johnson on the Boxer single 'Nothing But Love'/'Tell Me Who' and you get one of the all-time classic singles (even if it was cut in Chicago!). By contrast, the glorious racket that is 'Baby Don't You Want To Go' ('Sweet Home Chicago' in all but name) shows the 'no-fi' production qualities of Fortune's Jack and Devora Brown, but you get to hear Robert Richard blowing lusty harmonica on the Robert Johnson song.

You could argue that some of the Eddie Burns tracks don't really cut it. His 1951 session for Joe Von Battle was leased to Gotham, who never released any of the sides and I can understand why. The session, although vibrant, is badly recorded, with a lumpen drummer dropping bombs on 'Gangster Blues'.

The guitarist, who sounds like John Lee Hooker, but may be John T Smith, is too high in the mix on some tracks. Against that, however, his 1954 Checker single is beautifully produced and his later sides for Harvey Fuqua's eponymous label are excellent sides, with a surprisingly good Marvin Gaye on drums!

John lee Hooker and Little Sonny have seven tracks each. Four of the Hooker's are wonderful solo tracks, recorded by Elmer Barbee and placed with Chance in Chicago. Listen to these and you understand why Hooker was christened 'The Boogie Man'. By contrast, 'Miss Sadie Mae' and '609 Boogie' place Hooker with a small band, very early on in his career. Cut by Fortune, they were held in the vaults by Jack Brown, who was pissed off by Hooketr's extra-contractual excursions, and were not released until a decade later. As Mike Rowe makes clear in his entertaining and perceptive liner notes, these

sides represent the music Hooker was playing in the Detroit clubs. Little Sonny is an engaging harmonica player, who is represented by his complete session for JVB in 1959, along with his first 45, cut for Duke. I have to say that his 'I Hear My Woman Calling', a fine rocker, is surpassed by the alternate version, which first saw the light of day on a Japanese P-Vine CD.

All six titles that L C Green, accompanied by Walter Mitchell on harp, cut for Dot in Gallatin, TN., appear here. The material they recorded was heavily influenced by Sonny Boy #1, but no shame in that, as they are wonderful country blues. L C (no given names) was not even a legend in his own lunchtime, as his sister Becky was unaware that he had even recorded!

Calvin Frazier, Doctor Ross and Eddie Kirkland all get four tracks. Calvin is usually remembered as the running-buddy and second guitarist to Robert Johnson, but he might just as well be remembered for his penchant for recycling his songs, recording 'Lilly Mae' no less than four times. Three of the versions are included here and show Frazier to have been a first-class guitarist, who was never going to make the big time on such penny-ante labels as New Song and JVB. Doctor Ross, a devotee of Sonny Boy #1, has a higher profile, as a result of not only recording for Sun, but benefiting from the European tours that followed the 'rediscovery' of the music at the beginning of the 60s. 'Cat Squirrel', one side of his first 45 for Fortune, cops off early Muddy Waters and 'Industrial Boogie', released on Ross's own DIR label, is a loose version of Hooker's 'Boogie Chillen'. Eddie Kirkland spent much of his early career as an accompaniest to John Lee Hooker – no easy task! - and is represented here by his first recording – an unissued Sensation acetate, also on the afore-mentioned 'Garden City Blues' compilation – together with a Fortune track, 'I'll Move You Baby', which stylistically is as rough as a badger's arse, but somehow works. His other two cuts are both sides of Fortune 848 from 1959, which nowadays fetches four figures on the collector market. Kirkland complained that Elmore James lifted 'I Must Have Done Somebody Wrong' from him, but as Eddie's version was issued the year before Elmore's, he gets scant sympathy from me.

Detroit Count, Harvey Hill, Jr. and Martee Bradley all have a brace of tracks each. The Count's two were cut by Joe Von Battle and leased to King, but not issued. 'Parrot Lounge' plays less then a minute and is thus no more than a part-performance, but 'Detroit Boogie' is a stormer of a piano workout. A

great shame that the Count (real name Bob White) did not record more often,

but the booze apparently did for him – what a silly Count! Harvey Hill's only single is rightly regarded as a post-war classic. 'She Fool Me', a Washboard Sam song, is an amusing tale of a mug punter being taken for $45 by the promise, never materialising, of getting his ashes hauled. As a bonus, there is a wonderful photo of Harvey Hill grinning over his Gibson ED175 guitar.

I'm guessing that comparatively few of you will have heard of Martee Bradley, but he cut two 78s for the obscure Citation label in the early 50s.

Tony Russell tells me that Bradley was born in Louisiana in 1926 and died in Michigan in 1999. He was billed on the label of his records, bizarrely, as

“The Hastings Street Hillbilly” and worked at various times as a shoeshine boy and an engineer. He appears to have had a son, who died serving in Vietnam. The two tracks here, much the better of the four he recorded, show a stylistic influence, according to Bruce Bastin, from the Western part of the Carolinas. Whatever the regional influence, these two tracks are lovely country blues.

We are now down to the last nine 'singleton' artists. Sticking with the Carolinas, Henry Smith's one side of Fortune 802 shows an indebtedness to Blind Boy Fuller. The other side of the 78 features Clarence Posey, an excellent pianist, who by unknown means was able to master the intracacies of the Fortune studio piano, which had three of the black keys missing! John Brim's only track benefits from a marvelously wistful piano accompaniment by Big Maceo, surely Detroit's and one of the Blues foremost pianists. Earl Chatman, about whom nothing is known, has one side of his Fortune 45 included. A shame that room could not be found for his more-countrified two sides on acetate. Speaking of acetates, Detroit Slim survives from a JVB acetate. A competent guitar and harp performance. Sam Kelly's one side on Von may hide the identity of Walter Mitchell, as the other side is by L C Green. The usual disastrous pairing of two harps actually works surprisingly well. Namesake Bob Kelly has a later, but nonetheless first class blues, originally released on Clarence Blair's Bango label. Finally, two artists who recorded well after the time-frame of this box set are featured at the beginning of their recording careers. Big Jack Reynolds' 'Pitch A Boogie Woogie' is a raw but tough harp blues and the same is true of Little Daddy Walton's 'Papa Doo', with a fine pianist aboard.

The end of a marathon excursion along the highways and byways off Hastings Street, but a thoroughly enjoyable and rewarding trip. To those of you that love the early post-war Detroit Blues, this is a must buy, not thrown together, but assembled with lots of TLC by Mike and Pete. And to those of you whose ears are tired of being assaulted by soi-disant blues 'artists' whose idea of playing the music is to crank the amp up to 11, why not investigate this very special release. It will reward you for years to come.

Chris Bentley